

As My Wimsey Takes Me, Episode 10 transcript

[THEME MUSIC: jaunty Bach-esque piano notes played in counterpoint gradually fading in]

CHARIS: Hello, and welcome to “As My Wimsey Takes Me!” I’m Charis Ellison--

SHARON: --and I’m Sharon Hsu. Today we’re talking about STRONG POISON, wherein Lord Peter has the meet cute of his life, with someone standing trial for murder!

[sound of courtroom crowd murmuring then gavel bangs]

SHARON: So Charis, we are doing something a little bit new.

CHARIS: Yeah! So we’re starting to get into the books where we feel that we need more time to discuss. When we discussed THE UNPLEASANTNESS AT THE BELLONA CLUB we tried splitting the book into more episodes and we found that we got bogged down in the fact that we couldn’t talk about things because we weren’t to that section of the book yet, and it felt pretty constricting. So as we move forward we are going to try a different format where we are talking about the first eleven chapters of STRONG POISON--

SHARON: --so, the first half.

CHARIS: Yeah, the first half. And we’re going to talk about it over two episodes. So that’s going to give us more room to talk about the larger themes, the larger events, without having to cram everything in the third episode when we’re finally free to talk about stuff.

[both chuckling]

SHARON: Yes! So it feels like we’ve been waiting for so long to get to this particular book and now we’re finally here! [laughing]

CHARIS: We’re *finally* here! And we finally get to meet Harriet Vane. I’m so excited.

SHARON: Yeah! Me too! Let’s talk about how we *meet* her, because the first chapter of this book is really weird to me. I mean weird and fascinating and wonderful.

CHARIS: I love the first chapter of this book. I know that some people probably...[trails off, muttering] say I shouldn’t say know -- I *imagine* that some people probably find it boring and tedious, because it’s a lot of, you know, it’s an info dump.

SHARON: Mmhmm

CHARIS: Which is one of those *things* you are *not* supposed to do!

SHARON: [laughing] Sayers just breaking rules, left and right!

CHARIS: Just, out the window. But, you know, that's such a huge piece of writing advice. People are just "oh don't do info dumps" and it's like "oh I /ove this info dump, give me more of it!" [both laughing] It actually reminds me of, this may be before you joined Readerville, but there was a book that the young adult reading group was discussing. The beginning of the book, the first several paragraphs are all about how there's orange juice on the breakfast table. That's used as a vehicle to be like "this is where they are geographically, and this is what's going on politically" and the group was split on liking the orange juice or hating the orange juice. To the point where someone made buttons and somewhere in a keepsake box I have a button that says I am pro-juice.

SHARON: [laughing] That's amazing!

CHARIS: And so it is just a fact that I am pro-juice. [both laughing] Meaning that I do like to get lots of world building, but I like the world building to come to me through an object, you know?

SHARON: Mmhmm

CHARIS: Or if this book just started with 'this is what happened at the trial' that would be different, but I love the way it comes through multiple different little character sketches of the different people who are in the audience.

SHARON: Mmhmm, and reacting to the information.

CHARIS: Yeah and so I guess we should give some context, but what's happening is that the trial is kind of at an end. All the evidence has been heard, the lawyers have presented their final arguments, and the judge is giving the summing up where he is summarizing the trial. This is pages and pages of him talking. And that's used to deliver all this information about the investigation because this is a book that begins with: the crime has been committed, the crime has been investigated, a conclusion has been reached, there has been a trial and we're at the end of that trial. And so the judge's speech is summarizing all of the information for us on the pretext of he's reminding the jury of everything that they need to take into consideration before they go and deliberate.

SHARON: Yeah, and I think we as readers are really put into the place of that jury, right? Because the judge is--

CHARIS: Yeah!

SHARON: --throughout most of this chapter, addressing them directly as "you" but then of course, we become implicated in that "you." And it's really cool how the book has different

characters observing that the judge is hostile to the defendant. Our dear friend Waffles Newton, the newspaper man with the best name ever-- [both laughing]

CHARIS: Yeah and Salcombe Hardy!

SHARON: --notes that the judge is being hostile and so this is also very deliberately pointed out as a narrative with bias. Like *inherent* in it, you know?

CHARIS: Yeah.

SHARON: Which is really interesting too because -- I don't know -- I mean, I drew a big circle around the very first sentence and wrote "whose perspective are we in?"

CHARIS: Mmmm, that's a *good* question!

SHARON: Yeah! Because the first line reads, "there were crimson roses on the bench; they looked like splashes of blood" and it's -- I don't know, Sayers is so masterful because we slide from this very objective observation, right? There *were* crimson roses on the bench. And in the space of a semicolon we're in subjective interpretation: they looked like splashes of blood. Well who did they look like splashes of blood to? Harriet? Peter? Who? *Who?* [laughing]

CHARIS: Ohh! That *is* interesting, because, you know, in my notes I put that in this chapter we aren't in Peter's head at all.

SHARON: Mhmm, and I think I would agree with that!

CHARIS: Except you've just changed my mind because I feel like it has to be Peter who's looking at that.

SHARON: Don't you think it could be Harriet as well?

CHARIS: I think it could be, but I'm inclined to think that it's more likely to be Peter.

SHARON: Hmmm

CHARIS: But I like the fact that it's not specified.

SHARON: Right, where it's almost as though the narrator -- this pretext of this omniscient narrator we have is, I don't know...that subjectivity is breaking through, right?

CHARIS: Yeah.

SHARON: Because then it's almost like the camera cranes out and we have the judge, and then we see Sal and Waffles talking to each other, and it's not until several pages later that we even know Peter is in the room so, yeah. I don't know! It's just -- it's really good.

CHARIS: I think I could make an argument for it being Peter's subjective influence coming through because all the other character portraits that we observe are all people in the audience, and so you could make an argument that it's Peter overhearing those bits of conversation--

SHARON:--dialogue, yeah. I like that. I think it would also explain why in some ways the description of the judge feels a bit...[trails off]

CHARIS: Oh, yeah. I love the description of the judge!

SHARON: Right? I feel like it could come from Peter's point of view because he's not very happy with the judge. [both laughing]

CHARIS: Right. Yeah, the judge is described like, "the judge is an old man, so old he seemed to have outlived time and change and death. His parrot face and parrot voice were dry like his old, heavily veined hands." I'm just like, whoa.

SHARON: Yeah!

CHARIS: You know, there's very little physical description in this first chapter because it is primarily dialogue. The little bits of physical description that there are so evocative.

SHARON: Yeah, our first, almost our only look at Harriet is she's named as the prisoner, she's not named as herself. And it says, "her eyes like dark smudges under the heavy, square brows seemed equally without fear and without hope. They waited." That's it! [chuckling]

CHARIS: So, having gone into raptures about the form of this chapter, and how interesting it is, should we outline a little bit, a much shorter summation maybe than the judge was giving? [both laugh] But a summation of the case as it exists at the moment?

SHARON: [laughing] Yeah, we probably should.

CHARIS: [laughing] We *probably* should!

SHARON: Yeah, I can. In sum, the judge is addressing the jury about the case of the poisoning of a young artist. Or artiste, as he probably would have liked to think of himself. Philip Boyes was a writer. He wrote very, y'know, we'll come to find out later that he wrote high-brow, literary, serious books.

CHARIS: Mmm, the judge calls them, “things that were sometimes called of an advanced type.” And points out that they, “preach doctrines which may seem to some of us immoral or seditious, such as atheism and anarchy and what is known as ‘free love.’”

SHARON: Mmhmm, so that’s what the judge thinks about *that* [CHARIS chuckling]. So yeah, Philip is part of that whole bohemian circle. You know, probably a wannabe modernist. And I think we’ll talk much more next episode about the real life glimpses Sayers was drawing from.

CHARIS: Yeah.

SHARON: So he meets Harriet Vane, our defendant, and as the judge puts it, “starts badgering her to live with him.” He claims he’s not interested in marriage and finally she gives in and you know, cuts ties with her family, cuts ties with her friends because she has been convinced to do something against her own morals. So then nearly a year goes by and he proposes marriage to Harriet and that’s the point at which she flies into a rage. Because in her point of view it’s like, you’ve made a fool out of me, right? You’ve convinced me that in order to be with you I have to give up something I hold really dearly and strongly and turns out it was just a test. So she leaves him at that point. Boyes moves in at the point with a cousin, Norman Urquhart who is a lawyer, and starts having some stomach troubles. And around that same time Harriet is doing research for a new novel of hers about arsenic poisoning. So the case brings up the fact that she’d gone to various different chemists and under a bunch of aliases and false stories bought up a large stock of arsenic and her alibi is that she’s a writer! She’s doing research! That it’s the plot of her next novel.

CHARIS: Right.

SHARON: The problem is that Philip Boyes at one point, there’s an evening -- they’ve run into each other socially at various points, and then he writes her a note saying ‘I want to see you, I want to see if we can...I cannot understand your attitude and I’d like to just *make* you see things in the right perspective and if not I’m gonna just chuck it and move out west once and for all.’ So he eats a hearty dinner with his cousin, he goes to see Harriet, they have coffee, they quarrel again, and when he gets home he takes very, very ill with violent stomach troubles and dies a few days later. And at first everyone’s like, ‘oh! Well he’s always had gastritis. It’s just sort of bad luck.’ But an enterprising nurse points out some irregularities about the case and as we know from A NATURAL DEATH when that happens, somebody starts going digging! And they discover at that point that Philip Boyes was poisoned with a rather large amount of arsenic.

CHARIS: [laughing] Just, an excessive amount of arsenic.

SHARON: [dragging syllables for emphasis] Lots and lots of arsenic! And, obviously, who has access to all this arsenic? Harriet. There’s a long bit about how meticulously the police went through all the things that he’d eaten that evening with his cousin. Every dish, both of them had some, and then it was sent down. The only thing Boyes had that nobody else shared was a

glass of burgundy. But they tested the bottle and no arsenic could be found so, yeah. Things are looking pretty bad for Harriet at this point.

CHARIS: Yeah. A point that is mentioned that is worth bringing up is Philip Boyes' hair; that they found arsenic in his hair, which shows that he was dosed with arsenic more than once--

SHARON: Yes.

CHARIS: --because it leaves a deposit in hair and fingernails that would then grow out. And so the judge explains and says that the conclusion that the police reached was that he had been dosed with arsenic a couple of times before and those incidences approximately correlate to, roughly, the times that he had met Harriet Vane in social settings. At, you know, informal studio parties where they had accidentally run into each other--

SHARON: --after the breakup--

CHARIS: --yeah, and so there's this unfortunate match up of timelines that looks quite suspicious.

SHARON: Yes, and this is where the judge's hostility is very evident, right? It's really interesting to me how much the narrative, through the judge, makes explicit what we all do as readers, right? We make interpretations. We perform close readings. He brings up the note that Boyes sent to Harriet and is like 'well, the defense would like you to think that he was saying he was possible gonna kill himself and that's what it meant by saying he was going out west, which is a common metaphor for suicide' but he doesn't say 'I interpret it this way.' He's reminding the jury that there are these other interpretations that can be made from the same text and I'm just delighted because that's very much what we as detective fiction readers do, right? There's this Hermeneutic suspicion that we're always bringing to close reading to try and pick up clues and it's just made very, very evident here how the judge is interpreting events and is not himself actually an objective force.

CHARIS: Yeah.

SHARON: Oh, also! I wanted to bring up, because it's just delightful, there's this point where he's talking about all the things Boyes ate. I think, on a different trip where he also magically seemed to become healthier away from London--

CHARIS: Right, he went away to Wales and he felt so much better.

SHARON: Mhmm, suspicious! But the judge says at 11:00 Boyes had a Guinness observing that, according to the advertisements, it was good for you. And I just wanted to flag that [laughingly] because Sayers, for much of the 1920s was working for an advertising agency and

she was actually part of the team who came up with the ‘Guinness is good for you’ toucan advertisement. So I was like, “oh! She’s doing a little shout out to herself!” That’s so delightful!

CHARIS: [laughing] Yeah!

SHARON: Anyway, I’ll scare up one of those ads and put it in the show notes.

CHARIS: The toucan spawned a whole advertising campaign of zoo animals but the toucan -- specifically, the jingle that went with it, I think is attributed to Sayers.

SHARON: And we will, you know, not to worry readers, we’ll talk at length in our next episode about the intersection of Sayers’ personal life and this book so--

CHARIS: Yes.

SHARON: We’re not going to info dump it *here* but stay tuned!

[Both laughing]

CHARIS: Yes, stay tuned! So the judge gives his thorough summing up. Oh, it’s so thorough it goes over two chapters and we know that Wimsey is in the audience of the trial. Freddy Arbuthnot is also there, and so is the dowager duchess -- Wimsey’s mother.

SHARON: And we *also* find, once the judge sends the jury off to deliberate, that there’s someone else we know from previous books!

CHARIS: Yes! Miss Climpson who--

SHARON: Just *happens* to be on the jury!

CHARIS: *Just happens* to. On the very first page we get a summary of the people who are in the jury and she’s not named then. It just says that there were “three women--an elderly spinster, a stout capable woman who kept a sweet-shop, and a harrassed wife and mother...” but it’s not just any elderly spinster! It’s our elderly spinster! It’s Miss Climpson!

SHARON: It’s Miss Climpson!

CHARIS: So the jury goes out and everyone is expecting a quick verdict because everyone is just like, ‘ooh, it seems so obvious!’

SHARON: Mmhmm

CHARIS: And then we get this interlude which I think is really fun, where the narrative is telling us how long it's going. We've taken two chapters to do the summing up and in chapter three we're getting the wait for the verdict. [Both chuckling] Waffles Newton is like, 'they won't be long! It's pretty damned obvious!' So Waffles Newton goes off to drop some stuff off at his newspaper because it's evening, because the summation took so long. And there's-- we get some more character portraits. I love this little reference to Cuthbert Logan who reported for a morning paper and was a man of more leisure, who settled down to write a word picture of the trial. And then there's -- we get a description of, y'know, everyone leaves because it's recessed because the jury is deliberating and, "Sir Impey Biggs having watched over his client's interests to the last, disappeared, chatting cheerful to the attorney general and followed by the smaller legal fry. The dock was deserted. On the bench the red roses stood solitary, their petals dropping." There's a lot of symbolism in those roses that we get described twice.

SHARON: Yeah. It's so interesting how the mechanics of the law --you know, just, the gears of the law are just grinding on, right? It's very business as usual in a lot of ways. The newspaper people are like, 'oh yeah! This will come back no problem. We'll be able to just file, and leave.'

CHARIS: Yeah, 'we'll be able to get our story in for the morning edition.'

SHARON: Yeah! And Biggs seems cheerful even though for all appearances it seems like his client is about to be convicted for murder so, not sure why he's so laissez-faire.

CHARIS: He gets paid either way?

SHARON: I guess so!

CHARIS: It's at this point that we see Parker, it says "Chief Inspector Parker--"

SHARON: --he got his promotion!

CHARIS: It says "he came slowly up to the crowd and greeted the dowager. 'And what do you think of it, Peter?' he added, turning to see. 'Rather neatly got up, eh?'" And this is the first time that we find out what Wimsey is thinking because he says "Charles, you ought not to be allowed out without me. You've made a mistake, old man." And we find out Wimsey is 100% immovably convinced that Harriet Vane is innocent, even though we have just been given a very convincing amount of evidence.

SHARON: Pages and pages of evidence!

CHARIS: Very damning evidence. But Peter's convinced that she didn't do it. And Parker's just like, "Oh, come!" And Peter says, "She didn't do it. It's very convincing and water-tight but it's all wrong." It says "Parker looked distressed. He had confidence in Wimsey's judgement, and, in spite of his own interior certainty, he felt shaken." I think that's really interesting. Because we

talked in our last episode about THE UNPLEASANTNESS AT THE BELLONA CLUB, about when it came to Ann Dorland, and Peter was relying a lot on his intuition. He saw her studio, he looked at her paintings, and it told *him* something that it didn't tell Parker. Something beyond the facts of what were in the room, right?

SHARON: Mmhmm

CHARIS: Because we saw Parker see Ann Dorland's studio before Peter, right? And per Parker, it was an assembly of objects and the objects had a certain amount of significance. Like 'oh, there's books about crime' and 'oh there's books about chemistry' and 'oh there's bottles and things,' which were all very suggestive to him. And then Peter goes and looks at it and is more interested in the paintings and comes to a very different conclusion.

SHARON: Yeah!

CHARIS: So I think it's really interesting the way that we see Parker being a very facts-oriented detective, which is a quite good kind of detective to be if you're going to be a professional police detective probably! [SHARON laughs]

SHARON: He even says that. Peter acknowledges, 'there's nothing wrong with the case that you've built. It's knife-proof. The only thing wrong is that the girl's innocent.' And Parker accuses him of turning into "a common or garden psychologist," right? So Parker is acknowledging, 'you are sort of depending on an intuition on somebody's character and whether they would be capable of murder more than you're depending on facts.'

CHARIS: But I also like the fact that Parker, even though he's brushing it off in this scene, as the book goes on we see him take Peter seriously. Even when he's not convinced he's like, 'well I'll help you. I'm gonna support you investigating even though I'm not sure.'

SHARON: Yeah.

CHARIS: Which, that reminds me of UNNATURAL DEATH where most of the book, at least half the book, Parker is like [put-upon voice] 'there isn't a case here, why are we doing this?' [both chuckle] But he's still there, doing it anyway.

SHARON: Yeah. And there's definitely also the callback to CLOUDS OF WITNESS, right? Where later on when Peter goes to see Parker, 'I need you to put some people on tracking down if it was possible that Philip Boyes died by suicide.' And Parker says, "anybody would think you'd gone goopy over the girl" [both laughing] Peter very bitterly points out, y'know, about how Parker went off on the deep end about Mary during that case "Goopy, indeed! I never heard anything so vulgar!" But the moment that Parker realizes that Peter has in fact gone 'goopy' for Harriet he goes quite serious. He's like, "oh if it's like that I'm damned sorry, old man."

CHARIS: Yeah.

SHARON: So there's a way in which the book points at the rhyme between what happens to both of them. Falling for a defendant or falling for someone who seems to be wrapped up in a case that they should be very objective about.

Miss Climpson also has an intuition. Do you want to talk about that?

CHARIS: Yeah! That's such an important hinge. When Wimsey is talking to Parker at the trial, Parker says, "Wimsey, I wish you would tell me--" And Peter says, "too late, too late, you cannot enter now." [SHARON laughs] "I've locked my heart in a silver box and pinned wi' a golden pin. Nobody's opinion matters now, except the jury's. I expect Miss Climpson is telling 'em all about it." And then it goes on to give us hints about how long it's taking. "'They've been out an hour-and-a-half,' said a girl to her fiance just behind Wimsey." And then a little bit later, "'I've been talking to one of the ushers,' said the Man Who Knows the Ropes, importantly, to a friend. 'The judge has just sent round to the jury to ask if he can help them in any way.'"

The jury deliberates for five hours. And at five hours, "'there's a terrific crowd in the street,' said the Man Who Knows the Ropes, returning from a reconnaissance."

The jury eventually comes back and says that they can't agree. The judge sends them to deliberate some more. It turns out, after six hours and a half hours of jury deliberation, the jury can't agree.

SHARON: So it's a hung trial, they'll have to do another one.

CHARIS: Right. And it's very clear that Miss Climpson was the sticking point.

SHARON: Mmhmm. And Freddy Arbuthnot sort of accuses Peter of jury tampering.

CHARIS: [while laughing] He's like 'did you wink at her?'

SHARON: Yeah. And Peter is like "I didn't! Believe me or believe me not, I refrained from so much as a lifted eyebrow." Which is an important point, right? Because you can't tamper with witnesses. That's not a good thing to do.

CHARIS: Yes. Influencing a jury is not good.

SHARON: Yes. Did I say temper with witnesses or tamper with a jury?

CHARIS: You said "witnesses."

SHARON: Oh, well. That is also a bad thing. [tongue in cheek] It's on my mind for some reason right now. [CHARIS laughs] But yeah, tampering with a jury: also bad.

CHARIS: Yeah. But it does lead us to [barely contained laughter] one of my favorite things which is: the judge says, 'there's nothing for it but to discharge you, the jury, and order a fresh trial.' The formalities are done and Wimsey rushes off to talk to Sir CP Biggs and asks to be sworn in as a clerk or something so that he can interview Harriet Vane. As soon as he's done that he rushes off, rounded the side door from which the jury were just emerging. Last of them all, her hat askew, and her Macintosh dragged awkwardly around her shoulders came the elderly spinster. She's telling him about how, "oh, it's my fault that we couldn't come to a decision but I couldn't in conscience say she had done when I was sure she hadn't, could I?" And Peter says, "you're absolutely right, she didn't do it, and thank god you stood up to them and gave her another chance. I'm going to prove she didn't do it and I'm going to take you out to dinner and...I say, Miss Climson?" "Yes?" "I hope you won't mind because, I haven't shaved since this morning, but I'm going to take you around the next quiet corner and kiss you."

SHARON: [delighted laughter] I love that so much! And we know from THE LOCKED ROOM that Peter's quite a good kisser so...[trails off]

CHARIS: Yes! I just love that. "I hope you don't mind because I haven't shaved since this morning."

SHARON: Ever the gentleman!

CHARIS: Yes. So, we have talked about Peter's feelings already but I think it's really interesting that we're three chapters in, we get into the fourth chapter, and Peter's interest in the case hasn't been explained beyond the fact that he believes the fact that Harriet Vane is innocent. It's not until we get into chapter four and Peter meets Harriet Vane face-to-face and tells her he wants to marry her—

SHARON: [laughter]

CHARIS: —that's the first time as readers we're just like, "wait, what?" Because this is the first time that he's met her, but in the course of seeing her at the trial Peter has fallen in love with Harriet Vane.

SHARON: [emphatically] Head over heels.

CHARIS: Absolutely twitterpated!

SHARON: Yeah, there's this amazing line right when he is conducted into the interview room at the jail. He's kind of unnerved, I think, by being in her presence, and is like [awkwardly] 'er, er, I heard about the case and thought there might be something I could do, I rather enjoy

investigating things if you know what I mean.’ And Harriet responds, “‘being a writer of detective stories I have naturally studied your career with interest.” And the next line says, “she smiled suddenly at him and his heart turned to water.” Which [deep sigh] that’s just, that’s just so good.

CHARIS: Yes!

SHARON: And he’s just making such an ass of himself [laughingly] because the silly act is quite inappropriate under these circumstances.

CHARIS: Right, and he just doesn’t know what to do with himself. I think what’s tripping him up is he’s torn between the manners that he usually puts on when he interviews people and the fact that he wants to be genuine with her.

SHARON: Yes.

CHARIS: He’s just, sincerely nervous and it’s just *so cute*, it’s really cute, because we’re so used to seeing Peter be completely suave and he is just ass-over-teakettle in love.

SHARON: And it’s just so funny how the narrative just keeps puncturing that bubble, like when he asks her to marry him. “Harriet Vane who had been smiling at him, frowned, and an indefinable expression of distaste came into her eyes. ‘Oh, are you another of them? That makes 47.’ ‘47 of whats?’ Asked Wimsey very much taken aback. ‘Proposals! They come in by every post. I suppose there are a lot of imbeciles who want to marry anybody who’s at all notorious.” So he’s, you know, sitting there all like, ‘oh, I should ask her to marry me!’ And then she’s like, ‘ohh, you’re one of *those*.’ Peter’s never been “one of *those*” in his entire life, right?

CHARIS: Right! He’s not at all used to that. Although I do like that he doesn’t *quite* propose. He says, “what I mean to say is, when this is all over I want to marry you, if you can put up with me and all that.” [both laughing]

SHARON: Oh, even worse!

CHARIS: Yeah!

SHARON: [barely contained laughter] Trying to explain why he’s attracted to her!

CHARIS: He’s like, ‘I just thought you’d be an attractive person to marry, that’s all. I mean, I sort of took advantage here. I can’t tell you why. There’s a rule about it, you know.’

Sharon: ‘Life would be so jolly! You seem like someone I could talk sensibly to and I could give you plots for books!’

CHARIS: And actually, we don't get a more concrete reason for why Peter fell in love with Harriet until Gaudy Night.

SHARON: So many books and years later! [laughing]

CHARIS: So, we're a-ways off. We are several books and five years away from him saying outright what it was that made him fall in love with her.

SHARON: This might be a good time to mention the essay that Sayers wrote about this. It was published in 1946, so *quite* a few years off, and she was reflecting on GAUDY NIGHT -- the essay's entitled Gaudy Night and it was collected into THE ART OF THE MYSTERY STORY which was edited by Howard Haycraft according to my notes -- and she talks about, basically, at this point, she's been writing Lord Peter for close to a decade, I believe. And she says "you know, any character that remains static except for repertory of tricks and attitudes is bound to become a monstrous weariness to his maker in the course of nine or ten volumes. Let me confess, that when I undertook Strong Poison it was with the infanticidal intention of doing away with Peter, that is, of marrying him off and getting rid of him."

CHARIS: Right, so she really planned to use Harriet Vane as a way to Reichenbach Peter.

SHARON: Exactly, she then calls out the Reichenbach Falls-- of, you know, 'I didn't want to actually *kill* him but I needed [laughingly] to bury the nuisance.' She says, "two things were in the way of my fell purpose. First, in accordance with the general contradictoriness of things, just as I had decided I could not do with Peter for a single moment more, the multitudes began to rather sparsely and belated to roll up and hang hopefully about along the route, uttering agreeable cheers and convinced that the show was built to continue." So, she's starting to get some professional and commercial success for writing the Lord Peter story and then the other thing which is, I think, the bigger thing was that she said, "the far more delicate and dangerous thing was to take Peter away and perform a delicate operation on him. If the story was to go on, Peter had to become a complete human being, with a past and a future, with a consistent family and social history, with a complicated psychology and even the rudiments of a religious outlook." Because the impossibility is that if she's married him off to Harriet in this manner, Sayers would really be betraying all of her own principles that we've been talking about all along, right? That a good marriage or a good relationship or a good friendship demands equality and how could there *possibly* be equality between the two of them when he shows up to--

CHARIS: --*rescue* her.

SHARON: Yeah! She really wrote herself into a corner there. [laughing]

CHARIS: Yeah. There *is* no equality. She comes from nothing, she's been self-supporting, she's in this terrible situation, and if he shows up and rescues her and sweeps her off to a life of luxury then she's always and forever beholden to him.

SHARON: Exactly.

CHARIS: That would so drastically undermine everything that Sayers has said so far about relationships.

SHARON: It would mean that Peter never had to grow up or become a real human being, right? Harriet would be just another thing that he looked at and said 'I want that' and immediately possessed.

CHARIS: Yeah. We've talked about how Peter has complexity as a character in even the very earliest book but when Sayers starting planning this road for him, she was like, "oh, he has to be something *more* for this story to make sense," which, lucky for us, because we got several more books out of that need for character progression.

SHARON: And I'm really curious, I'd be very curious to hear from our listeners who might be reading the series along with us for their first time and going in chronological order, because you and I both read GAUDY NIGHT before we read STRONG POISON, so when we came *back* to STRONG POISON it was like "oh! Here's Harriet!" But I'm just so—

CHARIS: --yeah! We know where this is going!

SHARON: Mmhmm, but I'm so curious how she appears to someone who doesn't have all that, I don't know, prolepsis for lack of a better word? Who doesn't know the Harriet that gets presented in the later books, because she is kind of thinly sketched here. And I feel like this is why critics wrongly tend to accuse Sayers of 'oh she wrote the perfect man and then she wrote herself in as Harriet Vane and made her detective fall in love' because it *does* seem to come out of the blue, right?

CHARIS: Right. And her critics, both professional critics and just people on Twitter [SHARON chuckles], I have seen be like, 'oh, Dorothy Sayers. Isn't she the one that fell in love with her own character and wrote herself into the books to marry him?' And it's like [draggingly for emphasis] *no*. But you know, I've seen more than one person who hasn't read Sayers but that's the one thing they know about her, or *think* that they know.

SHARON: Which is so frustrating!

CHARIS: So annoying! You could make arguments that Peter's temperament draws more on Sayers than Harriet's temperament does. But I also think you could make a very strong argument that Sayers was building both characters out of a framework of her own thoughts and feelings.

SHARON: Right.

CHARIS: Whatever she draws from her own experience, that's just the scaffolding that she builds the character around, you know? It's not a matter of 'she based this character on herself,' it's a matter of 'she drew on her own experiences because writers *do* that' and then used the books as a way to explore them.

SHARON: Yeah. I mean, doing that kind of character archaeology of 'who does this character correspond to in the author's life' is possibly the most boring version of [both laughing] a criticism I could think of.

CHARIS: It's only interesting in very limited ways.

SHARON: Yeah! And here's the thing -- the truism about Joyce's Ulysses: that Stephen Dedalus is a young James Joyce and Leopoldo Bloom is an old James Joyce -- *nobody* has any problem with Joyce being reflected in two of his characters so why is it so far-fetched that Sayers would be reflected in two or more of her own characters either?

CHARIS: Yeah, and why is that a reason to dismiss her work?

SHARON: Right!

CHARIS: It's like what *if* she did directly write Harriet Vane as a direct reflection of herself? Why not? Why would that devalue her work?

SHARON: Exactly. No male writer in the canon is *ever* called to task for that, so...mmmm...the answer is misogyny.

CHARIS: Yeah, just some good ol' fashioned misogyny that isn't old fashioned at all because it's never gone out of fashion. [SHARON chuckling]

SHARON: Well, so back to the book! [both laughing] I remember you saying very early, when we were talking about WHOSE BODY that it's also funny that people accused Sayers of this because the first comparison that she makes on Peter is to maggots. And Peter actually asks Harriet, "it'd be one thing if you're not attracted to me...I don't positively repel you do I? Because if I do then I'll leave you alone forever." And Harriet kindly and a little sadly says, "no, you don't repel me." And Peter asks "I don't remind you of white slugs or make you go goose-flesh all over?" So it's almost like he's picking up on his creator's picture of the maggots breeding in cheese. [chuckling]

CHARIS: Yeah. But, to still be talking about this first meeting between Peter and Harriet, he mentions to her that his mother likes the look of her. He says, "my mum is the only one who counts and she likes you very much from what she's seen of you." And Harriet says, "so you

had me inspected?” [SHARON laughs] Peter says, “no, dash it all! I seem to be saying all the wrong things today! I was absolutely stunned that first day in court and I rushed off to my mater, who’s an absolute dear and the kind of person who really understands things, and I said ‘look here, here’s the absolutely one and only woman and she’s being put through a simply ghastly old business and for god’s sake come and hold my hand.’” I think that’s so sweet! This whole episode is just going to be us going through this first meeting being like, “I love these lines!”

SHARON: I know! Oh my goodness and the chemistry between them already, right? Harriet is, I mean, she really is quite brutal but who could blame her?

CHARIS: Right! She’s been—

BOTH: —through a lot.

SHARON: And she says, “bearing in mind, aren’t you, that I’ve had a lover?” Because, yes, hello double standards! Harriet is a ruined woman in the eyes of the world! And I *love* Peter’s response. He says, “oh yes! So have I if it comes to that, in fact, several!”

CHARIS: [laughingly] ‘I can provide quite good testimonials!’

SHARON: “I’m told I make love rather nicely, only I’m at a disadvantage at the moment. One can’t be very convincing at the other end of a table with a bloke looking in the door.” [both laughing] But I feel like that’s just, the perfect response, right? He’s like, ‘it would be height of hypocrisy for me to care at all about the fact that you’ve had a lover when I’ve had several and nobody in the world cares about my past — my sexual past.’

CHARIS: Mmhmm, I mean other than just going through this whole conversation line by line and talking about how much we love them do you have any more to say about Peter’s interview with Harriet?

SHARON: I think it’s interesting that right after he is like, ‘do I repulse you?’ He very blithely is like, ‘you know, any minor alterations...?’

“If you want me to grow a mustache or change the way I part my hair I’m happy to do it.” And Harriet says, “please don’t alter yourself in any particular.” And it’s kind of a throwaway line but it’s interesting ‘cause it points forward to later on when Peter goes and talks to our old friend, and his old friend, Marjorie Phelps because he’s trying to get more information from that bohemian crowd that Boyes and Harriet hung out with and there Marjorie says to him, “Peter do please be happy. I mean you’ve always been the comfortable sort of person that nothing could touch. Don’t alter will you?”

And the narrative says, “that was the second time Wimsey had been asked not to alter himself. The first time, the request had exalted him, this time it terrified him.” I find that interesting for a

couple of reasons. One, because it's starting to pick up that thread that for all that he's trying to use all of his usual distancing tactics, of putting on that silly ass persona, this case does mean a great deal to him and he's *terrified* that he's not going to be able to acquit Harriet's name, right?

CHARIS: Right. Because he only has one month before the new trial.

SHARON: Exactly.

CHARIS: He has a very tight timeline.

SHARON: Mmhmm. It's picking up on that fact that *Peter* understands, for better or worse, he's not gonna come out of this case the same person. If he loses, he loses her. And if he wins, to be worthy of her, he's going to have to change who he is. I think it's interesting that the narrative pairs Harriet saying 'don't alter yourself' kind of flippantly and Marjorie saying it, because, I think we've touched on this previously, there's a way in which female characters that showed up in previous books point forward to Harriet. I think most particularly, Ann Dorland was a kind of proto-Harriet.

CHARIS: There's a strong parallel between them at least situationally. Ann Dorland, she's been hurt by a man, she's been put in a situation where it *really* looks like she could've committed a crime. She's innocent but so much evidence seems to point to her. And the actions of other people have put her in an appalling place in the eyes of society. All those things add up to her being a prelude to Harriet Vane's situation.

SHARON: Exactly. I don't know that I have much more to say other than I think that this book does pick up on themes from a lot of the other books as well. Kind of call-backs.

CHARIS: And I think Dorothy Sayers was obviously very interested in women and the roles that women find themselves in socially, and what are the limits and barriers around women. And I think Dorothy Sayers was very interested in writing different types of women. We've seen a really good range of different female characters. Because sometimes even female writers don't write a broad variety of female characters.

SHARON: Yeah.

CHARIS: And I think that, you know, Sayer's experimented with women who were unlikeable, women who were bitter about their lives, women who were progressive. And so I feel like Harriet Vane is a lot of those character studies coalescing. Which is not to say — not to give anyone the impression that I think Harriet Vane is not a fully realized character in her own right.

SHARON: Yeah. Sayers says, "Harriet starts as a person whereas Peter has to become one."

CHARIS: I wonder how much of that is because, as we are going to talk about in our next episode, Sayers gave some of her own struggles and experiences to Harriet and that is a good tool as a writer for giving a character life immediately out of the gate. Because you give them a struggle that *you* know and... [trails off momentarily] I didn't really have a fully formulated thought around that.

[both laughing]

SHARON: I think it's quite complete!

CHARIS: Definitely one way to bring a character to life is to project on them. [both laughing] And it's foolproof! Which is not to say, again, that I think Harriet is *just* a projection of Sayers but that Sayers did use herself as a source.

SHARON: Yes, herself and I think, you know as we talked about in our episode with Mo Moulton, the experiences that her friends were having too, right? These women that she met in Oxford, these highly educated women who were in many ways accomplished and ambitious beyond what their social times could allow for.

CHARIS: Right.

SHARON: Should we end on Bunter coming to Peter and very tactfully asking if his lordship would like to make any changes to his domestic arrangements? Because Bunter can't possibly imagine that Peter will do anything other than save the day and Bunter can't imagine any young lady *possibly* saying no to his lordship.

[both laughing]

CHARIS: Yes! Do you want to give a little sketch of that scene, just for our listeners to put that in context?

SHARON: Yeah! It's just a little throwaway scene but it's so funny. The Bunter scene comes a little bit out of nowhere. It's in chapter 8. Peter is tasking Bunter with doing what Bunter does best which is, 'go and charm the household's staff -- the female household staff -- at Norman Urquhart's and see if you can find out anything about that meal they had together.' But then Bunter just very gently says -- you know, he's hovering a bit and Wimsey says "Bunter I have a sensation of being hovered over I do not like it!"

But he says, "I beg your lordship's pardon! But it had occurred to my mind to ask your lordship with every respect—" 'Oh god, Bunter! Don't break it gently! I can't bear it! Stab and end the creature. What is it?' 'I wish to ask you my lord whether your lordship thought of making any changes in your establishment?' 'Changes, Bunter, when I've just expressed to you my undying attachment to the loved routine of coffee, socks, razor, bath, bacon and the old familiar faces?

You're not giving me warning, are you?' 'No indeed, my lord! I would be very sorry indeed to leave your service. But I thought it possible that if your lordship was about to contract new ties. Sometimes when a gentleman is on a matrimonial basis, the lady may prefer to have a voice in the selection of the gentleman's personal assistance in which case...'"

Peter says, "this comes of training people to be detectives." [CHARIS laughing] But I love that at no point has Peter expressed to Bunter any of this interest in Harriet. I love that Bunter just knows him so well that he's like 'oh! I know exactly why you're doing this and also, I'm convinced that of course you will save the day and you know, bring home Mrs. Wimsey at some point!' [both laughing]

CHARIS: Well, not *Missus* Wimsey, she'd be *Lady* Peter.

SHARON: That's true. Her Ladyship.

CHARIS: Yep, yes. And Peter's just like, 'it seems I'm being obvious. I *hate* being obvious!'

But -- having done all of these lighthearted bits, at the very end of, I think, chapter 10 there's a line I want to touch on. Which, you know, there's some plot that's happened that we haven't talked about yet, although we will cover more of that in our next episode. But at the end of chapter 10 Wimsey has been contemplating the idea that Philip Boyes committed suicide and he's just been talking to Philip Boyes' cousin about the possibility and then the narrative says that "he pattered along Bedford road." So he's strolling along and he seems to be in a fairly positive frame of mind and he's saying, 'perhaps he did commit suicide.'

"I hope he did, I wish I could question him. I'd put him through it, blast him. I've got about fifteen different analyses of his character already--all different...It's very ungentlemanly to commit suicide without leaving in note to say you've done it--gets people into trouble." Which is a throw-back I think, to CLOUDS OF WITNESS.

SHARON: Mmhmm, direct!

CHARIS: Where there was *so much* trouble.

SHARON: Yeah he says earlier that he particularly hates the suicide cases because they're so hard to prove.

CHARIS: Yes, *so much* trouble because Cathcart didn't leave a note for the people there, he just wrote a letter to someone who posted it off away. But Peter follows it up by saying, "when I blow my brains out--' He stopped. 'I hope I shan't want to,' he said, 'I hope I shan't need to want to. Mother wouldn't like it, and it's messy. But I'm beginning to dislike this job of getting people hanged. It's damnable for their friends...I won't think about hanging. It's unnerving.'" This isn't the first time that we've seen Peter have a moment of suicidal ideation, right? Even earlier in

this book, at the beginning of chapter 5, he's visiting Miss Climpson and talking through the case and consulting with her and he says, "if I've got to find a homicidal maniac, I may as well cut my throat at once." And Miss Climpson says, "don't say that, even in jest."

There is a nihilistic sense of humor that we've seen all along with Peter, which is something that I think makes perfect sense to be characteristic of people who had gotten through World War I. Especially at this point, *STRONG POISON* was published in 1930, and I think that people were already starting to worry about World War II —was becoming a looming possibility. And sometimes when the world seems to be going up in flames nihilistic jokes seem to be the only thing that helps, which explains why so many people of *our* generation and younger say things that are a bit nihilistic.

But the fact that Peter stops and realizes that there's a potential for this to be not a joke. He says, "I shan't need to want to." The idea that if he loses this case he's just like, 'oh, it will potentially destroy me if I don't succeed.' I don't know. I don't have a conclusion to draw from that, it just — anytime I'm reading *STRONG POISON* and I get to that moment it just really strikes me.

SHARON: Yeah. I think because it's easy to read this book and even question a bit Peter's infatuation with Harriet -- and I'm calling it infatuation because how could it be anything other than that? He doesn't actually *know* her.

CHARIS: Right, he only *feels* like he knows her but that's just based on him observing her. It's not a—

SHARON: --yeah.

CHARIS: There's been no way for them to build a relationship so... [trails off]

SHARON: Right. And I think that's actually why the narrative is so careful to constantly puncture his bubble, especially when he's with her. And to often have her be the one to do it. So I think it's easy to read this and to take him at his word when he's like, "oh! It would be jolly to be married to you!" You know, 'you seem interesting!' And to not understand that that is a front that he's putting on because he's terrified that this is going to go the wrong way. And I think that this particular bit where he stops himself from following— from saying something that he might have to make good on later— it comes almost exactly halfway through the book and I think it's just one of those moments where we're being shown as readers that no, this is actually very, very serious for him. Similar to in *CLOUDS OF WITNESS* where he's like, 'ooh! Jolly! Footprints! Lalala!' And he says at one point to Charles very seriously, "don't think that because I'm acting this way it means I don't care or that I'm not deeply affected by what's going on." But it's kind of the only defense mechanism he has.

CHARIS: Yeah. I'd like to wrap this episode up by circling back to Miss Climpson and talking a little bit about the Cattery.

SHARON: Yes!

CHARIS: So, Miss Climpson we've met before. She, in UNNATURAL DEATH, acted as an inquiry agent for Lord Peter and he sent her out to investigate for him undercover, and since that time he has set up an operation that Miss Climpson runs for him and it is ostensibly a typing bureau. [both laughing] And it does have a few ladies who are typist, who do actual typing for "novelists and men of science" I think the book says; but the primary job is women who are spinsters like Miss Climpson or just women who are looking for work—

SHARON: --widows, I think--

CHARIS: --women who have had businesses that failed. The book says, "even a few bright young things that are bored with the club scene." Basically it's women who need some kind of outlet, who need a career, or just needed an interest—

SHARON: --or need a way to make money—

CHARIS: --yeah, or to support themselves. And the organization primarily answers advertisements -- the type of advertisement that are trying to lure young women or are trying to con elderly women out of their money. So fraudulent advertisements get investigated by this group of women and it's funded by Lord Peter and it says he sometimes refers to it as his "Cattery" which I think is delightful. But it's basically an investigative agency of women.

So we find out Peter has set this operation up and Miss Climpson is running it for him when he goes there and is visiting with Miss Climpson in her office and consulting her about the case. I love the fact that Peter has taken his idea about, you know, starting with Miss Climpson and thought how to make this a larger operation. How to go from one spinster to several and how should they be organized and what should they be doing?

SHARON: And we'll see as we continue our discussions just how resourceful these spinsters can be! And how much they can help in an investigation. I think it's something people talk about a lot like, at a certain age women become invisible to society because they are no longer young and attractive and I think there's a way in which Peter really -- weaponize is the wrong word -- but he uses that social invisibility to his advantage similarly to how he sends Bunter to talk to servants. He can send spinsters into places where he himself would just be far too noticeable whereas they can figure some things out. It's cool to see that acknowledgement, you know? That the detective is not god. The detective has limitations.

CHARIS: Right!

SHARON: So, in two weeks we'll come back to the first half of this book and get into the role of the Cattery in the investigation, as well as the bits of Sayers' biography that she was directly picking up on, especially when it comes to the Phillip Boyes and Harriet Vane relationship and we will be introduced to some other characters as well!

CHARIS: In the meantime you can find us on Twitter and Instagram as @wimseypod. That's W-I-M-S-E-Y. And you can find transcripts and show notes on our website at asmywimseytakesme.com

SHARON: Our logo is by Gabi Vicioso and our theme music was recorded and composed by Sarah Meholick. If you've enjoyed this episode of As My Wimsey Takes Me we'd love for you to give us a rating and a review on Apple Podcasts or on your podcatcher of choice. And we also hope you'll tell all your friends who love Dorothy L. Sayers as much as we do!

CHARIS: Join us next time for more talking piffle!

[THEME MUSIC: jaunty Bach-esque piano notes played in counterpoint begins and gradually fades out.]